

THE HERO AT THE CROSSROADS: PRODICUS AND THE CHOICE OF HERACLES

It has been referred to¹ as “one of the most influential pieces of world-literature”, this story, traceable back to the fifth century B.C. sophist Prodicus of Ceos², relating how the young Heracles, as he walked alone one day, was suddenly confronted by a crossroad that branched out into two divergent paths. While baffled as to which path to take, he was joined by two young women named after the qualities they personified: *Arete* (or Virtue) and *Kakia* (or Vice). Each was dressed appropriately to her role, “Virtue handsome and noble in mien, her body clothed in purity and her eyes in modesty... Vice plump and soft, with a complexion not left to nature, a wandering eye, and a dress revealing rather than concealing her charms”³. After hearing out their respective recommendations of the two ways, Heracles opted for the less immediately alluring road (and woman) that was Virtue, and ensured himself sweat and tears in the short term but ultimate immortality in the long run⁴.

Scholars have realised that Prodicus cannot have invented out of thin air each and every one of the details of the story; in particular, they have appreciated that many of its features are redolent of folk-tale. But how to decide which parts are traditional, which original? Already in antiquity, the second century A.D. author Athenaeus, in his entertaining *Deipnosophistae* or *Sophists at the Feast*, compared this story, especially its contest between

¹ By W. Schmidt, *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur* I 3 (Munich 1951), 41 (“eines der einflussreichsten Stücke der Weltliteratur”). See his n. 9 for a bibliography. For a list of ancient references to the story and more recent bibliography see G.-J. van Dijk, *Aἴτιοι, Λόγοι, Μῦθοι: Fables in Ancient, Classical, and Hellenistic Greek Literature* (“Mnemosyne” Suppl. 166, Leiden 1997), 673 and 683. For a recent assessment of the story (with further bibliography) see the contribution to *Heracles and Hercules: exploring a Graeco-Roman divinity* (edd. L. Rawlings and H. Bowden, Swansea 2005) by Emma Stafford, *Vice and Virtue: Heracles and the art of allegory*, 71ff. For a full catalogue of visual depictions of Heracles at the Crossroads from Medieval and Renaissance times onward see *The Oxford Guide to Classical Mythology 1300 -1990's*, I 527-529. For an introduction to that topic see Malcolm Bull, *The Mirror of the Gods: Classical Myth in Renaissance Art* (London 2005), 96-99.

² Paraphrased in Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* 2.1.21-34 = Prodicus 84 B 2 Diels-Kranz (II 313f.). For two recent (and antithetical) attempts to determine the exact verbal indebtedness of Xenophon to Prodicus see D. Sansone, “JHS” 124, 2004, 125-142, and V. Gray, “CQ” 56, 2006, 427-435.

³ W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* III (Cambridge 1969), 278.

⁴ Xenophon’s paraphrase does not continue on to include Heracles’ actual choice, still less its consequences for the hero’s end, but they must in Prodicus’ original treatment have run along the lines here laid out.

Hedone and *Arete* (or Pleasure pitted against Virtue), to the Judgement of Paris, which he took to be its source; and cited a portion of Sophocles' now lost Satyr play *Krisis*, or *The Judgement*, which depicted "Aphrodite [who] represented Pleasure, appearing anointed with myrrh and looking at herself in a mirror", whereas "Athena represented Thought and Mind, and also Excellence, anointing herself with oil and taking exercise"⁵. As far back in time as Hesiod, female personifications are associated with the image of the road. In verses 216-220 of this poet's *Works and Days*, "Dike is... fully personified as a maiden whom men assault and drag from her path for their own evil purposes", though overall we are not presented with "a very coherent picture, but a nexus of related images"⁶. At vv.287-92 of the same composition we find another instance of antithetical personification, *Kakotes* and *Arete*, or Vice and Virtue, again associated with road imagery. There is also early evidence from the world of visual art for the existence of another pair of contrasting female personifications, *Dike* and *Adikia*, Justice and Injustice⁷.

An Italian commentator⁸ on Prodicus' tale has expressed the opinion that the central *conchetto* of an individual faced with two paths requiring a choice between them was traditional, while the notion of two allegorical female figures and the application of the scheme to Heracles in particular was Prodicus' contribution. More than a century ago, a German scholar called W. Schultz wrote an article on Heracles at the Crossroads⁹ which another

⁵ Athenaeus 15.687C, quoting Sophocles *TrGF* 4 F *361 Radt. The English summary of this part of the play's contents comes from Lloyd-Jones' Loeb translation of Sophocles (III 194f.).

⁶ I quote from M.L. West's commentary (Oxford 1978), on vv. 220 and 216.

⁷ Pausanias 5.8.2 (= *LIMC* III 389 [A1]) describes such a scene on the now lost Chest of Cypselus, and two extant Attic vases from c. 520-510 (*ABV* 320.11 = *LIMC* A2 and *LIMC* A3) likewise show Justice and Injustice as two women, the former going for the latter with a hammer. Alan Shapiro ad loc. (*LIMC* p. 391) observes that there is "no literary parallel", but for analogues to the idea of divinities armed with hammers and the like cf. Lloyd-Jones, "CQ" 7, 1957, 18 = *Academic Papers* [I], 376. See too V. Dasen, *Jumeaux, Jumelles dans l'antiquité grecque et romain* (Zurich 2003), 103. Though there is no direct link with Heracles at the Crossroads, note that a famous woodcut by Albrecht Dürer (G. Bartrum, *Albrecht Dürer and His Legacy* [London 2002], No. 197 [p. 243, with bibliography]) has been interpreted as showing Virtue swinging a large club towards Pleasure (who is in the company of a satyr), while a youthful Heracles looks on as a non-belligerent (so E. Panofsky, *Hercules am Scheidewege* ["Studien der Bibliothek Warburg" 18, Leipzig 1930], 161ff., summarised by the same author in *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* [London 1955], 73-76).

⁸ M. Untersteiner in his commentary on the fragments of the Sophists, first published in Florence 1949, reprinted 1961 (IV 179).

⁹ *Herakles am Scheidewege*, "Philologus" 22, 1909, 488-499 (hereafter 'Schultz').

classicist has recently lambasted as full of “baseless speculations”¹⁰. Nonetheless, it contains one or two suggestive ideas which are well worth taking up and building upon. Let us begin with the implications of the imagery of the Road.

Schultz¹¹ drew attention to the fact that there exists a circle of folk-tales which have as their starting point the immemorably ancient pattern of *three* brothers who ride forth together on a quest¹². They come to the confluence of *three* roads, near which stands an inscription relating to the roads. To be more precise, the inscription describes the varying fates which will attend each individual who takes each of the three roads. Invariably, the youngest brother takes the path to which the most difficult and deadly fate is assigned, and nevertheless successfully wins the object of the quest (and, often enough, a beautiful princess into the bargain), in contrast to his elder siblings, who have opted for the easier and less threatening road or roads¹³.

In fact, one can find in folk-tale the pattern of *two* questing brothers at the meeting of *two* ways which apparently fits even more closely the requirements of the story of Heracles at the Crossroads. Thus in Alexander Afanasev’s famous collection of Russian folk-tales¹⁴, we read of two questing brothers who come to two dividing paths and a column upon which the inscription informs them that the individual who ventures down the right hand road will receive a kingdom while he who opts for the left hand direction will have many woes and sorrows to endure, but will finally marry a beautiful princess. We have here, then, a vestige of the pattern of the more

¹⁰ “Haltlose Spekulationen”: Walter Kissel in his mammoth commentary on the Roman writer of satires Persius (Heidelberg 1990, 435f.).

¹¹ Schultz, 498f. He drew for his information about this circle of stories upon the examples amassed in the thorough review article by R. Köhler, “Mémoires de l’Acad. Imp. de St. Pétersbourg” 19, 1873, iv-viii = *Kleinere Schriften zur Märchenforschung* I (Weimar 1898), 537-543. See now M. Scharfe in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* s.v. “Wegkreuzung” (XIV 540 ff.). Cf. Katherine Horn in the same reference work s.v. “Jüngste, Jüngster” (VII 807 ff.).

¹² Note that this group of tales easily falls within the interpretative scope of Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folk-Tale* (see below n. 28), since they commence with a lack (of some magical creature, sea horse, golden bird or the like), desiderated by the sons’ father, and they end with the lack’s ‘liquidation’.

¹³ See Stith Thompson, *Motif Index of Folk-Literature* J266: “short and dangerous or long, sure way”. Cf. J21.5.2: “take side road rather than main one where three roads meet”. Schultz, 493 n. 0 deduces from the evidence of such tales that the moralising tendency of Proclus’ narrative is not the sophist’s own invention, but was already rooted in the folk-tale.

¹⁴ On Afanasev’s collection, which served as the basis on which Propp (above, n. 12) based his theories about the ‘morphology’ of the folk-tale, see my remarks in “WS” 115, 2002, 6 n. 9. The tale in question appears on p. 52 of the English translation by N. Gutterman (New York 1975²).

difficult road leading to greater reward, but it is largely submerged, and, as a matter of fact, the sequel shows *both* brothers successful in their respective fates and returning home happily. Another close analogue is to be found in the collection of tales known as *The Thousand and One Nights*¹⁵, where the story of Prince Hassan and the green bird has *one* hero confronted with *three* paths and an inscription, covering the three faces of a pyramid, telling him that one road is the road of happiness, another the road of regret, and the third the road of no return. It is this last for which the hero opts.

In Prodicus' narrative, the entire logic of the story revolves around two antithetical paths represented by two antithetical female personifications. The question has been posed¹⁶ whether it is possible to assign priority to either of the motifs: did the paths ever exist independently of and prior to the women, or was the reverse perhaps the case? The folk-tales considered above might be taken to suggest the former possibility: in their narratives the crucial information about each of the paths is conveyed by an inanimate inscription which fulfils the same explanatory function as the articulate women in Prodicus' narrative. But a story-pattern deriving from the Ancient Near East suggests that the role of the women may have been present from very early on in the tale's development, and even connected with road imagery from the very start¹⁷. The Old Testament's Book of Proverbs 9.16ff. presents us with a picture of two women, Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly, calling to passers by in the street, a picture that seems to prefigure Heracles' encounter with Virtue and Vice.

Prodicus' female figures have been associated with the image of the road by a different line of argument. At some time in antiquity, the letter Y became established, for obvious reasons, as an apt symbol for the two diverging roads which confronted Heracles and, indeed, mankind in general, near the start of adult existence¹⁸. So we find the Christian apologist Lactantius (250-325) writing in his *Divinae Institutiones* 6.3 as follows: *humanam vitam progredi necesse est: una, quae in caelum ferat; altera, quae ad inferos deprimit... et quidam philosophi alteram virtutum esse voluerunt, alteram vitiorum... dicunt enim humanae vitae cursum Y litterae*

¹⁵ See the translation by E. W. Lane (London 1877), II 50.

¹⁶ By M.V. Fox in his commentary on *Proverbs* 9 ("The Anchor Bible series", New York 2000), 332.

¹⁷ M.P. Zehnder, *Wegmetaphorik im Alten Testament* ("Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft" 268, Berlin-New York 1999), esp. 563ff. and 573ff. Cf. my remarks in "CQ" 53, 2003, 40f. and in "SCO" 49, 2003, 159-163.

¹⁸ See Kissel as cited above (n. 10) and W. Harms, *Homo Viator in Bivio: Studien zur Bildlichkeit des Weges* (Munich 1970), esp. 29-35.

esse similem, quod unus quisque hominum, cum primae adolescentiae limen attigerit et in eum locum venerit, 'partes ubi se via findit in ambas' haereat nutabundus ac nesciat, in quam se partem potius inclinat.

There is no means by which we can tell whether this letter symbolism already existed at the time Prodicus composed his Heracles allegory, and, if so, whether he exploited it. Schultz, however, was impressed by the way in which the letter Y also became associated with the shape of a *tree*, more specifically the Tree of Life (or *Lebensbaum*) and he connected this¹⁹ with the primeval and widely disseminated notion of a World Tree²⁰, whose leaves are somehow revelatory of human destiny and in or beneath which sit a *duo* or *trio* of numinous female divinities such as the Norns of Norse mythology²¹, who lived by the root of the ash-tree Yggdrasil.

Whatever one may think of this idea, another relevant tale can be cited involving a trio of numinous female deities who reveal to two mortals their future destiny. Even though this story does not specifically contain the image of a crossroad (or of a tree), its contents can be shown to be most pertinent to our enquiry. It is the well known encounter of Macbeth and Banquo with the three weird sisters. Best known, of course, from Shakespeare's treatment, but for our comparative purposes it will be better to refer to the *Chronicles* of Holinshed which were the playwright's source, even though this will involve us in some pretty lengthy direct quotation²²:

It fortun'd as Macbeth and Banquo iourn'd towards Fores, where the king then onlie, they went sporting by the waie together without other companie, save onlie themselves, passing thorough the woods and fields, when suddenlie in the middest of a laund, there met them three women in strange and wild apparel, resembling creatures of elder world, whome when they attentivelie beheld, woondering much at

¹⁹ Schultz, 498.

²⁰ On the folk-tale concept of the 'World Tree' see W. Brückner's article in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* s.v. "Lebensbaum" (VIII 821), M.P. Nilsson, *The Minoan-Mycenean Religion and its Survival in Greek Religion* (Lund 1950²), 44f., etc.

²¹ For the significance of the Norns it is still worth reading Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie* I (Göttingen 1844³) 346ff. = *Teutonic Mythology* I 405-417. See further the article by R.W. Brednich s. v. 'Schicksalfrauen' in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, XI 1395-1404.

²² G. Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* VII (London 1975), 494f. Given my remark about the absence of any tree imagery in this story, it may seem relevant to observe that, in the often reproduced woodcut which accompanies as illustration Holinshed's account of Macbeth and Banquo's adventure, the three weird sisters—who are magnificently dressed, incidentally, in a manner not at all suggestive of modern ideas about witches—are presented as standing beside a most impressive tree. But the picture is apparently a standard one which recurs elsewhere in the edition of Holinshed's work, and indeed, in other works besides.

the sight, the first of them spake and said: All haile Macbeth, thane of Glamis.... The seconde of them said: Haile Macbeth, thane of Cawder. But the third said: All haile Macbeth, that hereafter shalt be king of Scotland.

Then Banquo: What manner of women (saith he) are you, that seeme so little favourable unto me, whereas to my fellow heere, besides highe offices, ye assigne also the kingdome, appointing forth nothing for me at all? Yes (saith the first of them) we promise greater benefits unto thee, than unto him. For he shall reigne in deed, but with an unluckie end: neither shall he leave anie issue behind him to succeed in his place, where contrarilie thou in deed shalt not reigne at all, but of thee those shall be borne which shall govern the Scottish kingdome by long order of continuall descent. Herewith the foresaid women vanished immediately out of their sight. This was reputed at the first but some vaine fantasticall illusion by Macbeth and Banquo.... But afterwards the common opinion was, that these women were either the weird sisters, that is... the goddesses of destinie, or else some nymphs or feiries, indued with knowledge of prophesie by their necromanticall science.

Although – to repeat the point – no road imagery as such is used in this passage, it is impossible not to detect a vestige of folk-tale’s two contrasting paths, one of seeming advantage but actually leading to doom (Macbeth’s), the other disappointing in the short term but, to the longer vision, bringing greater boons (Banquo’s)²³. No wonder one of the identifications offered for the weird sisters who deliver this prophecy was, in a term reminiscent of the aforementioned Norns, “the goddesses of Destiny”²⁴. The paradox inherent in the story (Shakespeare’s Banquo is hailed by the sisters [I.iii.65f.] as “Lesser than Macbeth and greater, / Not so happy, yet much happier”) matches precisely that in the story of Heracles’ choice, where the hero turns down immediate gain in favour of longer term benefits.

Another feature of Prodicus’ story, though at first sight trivial and insignificant, yields, upon investigation, further insights into the folk-tale derivation of the narrative. On arrival at the Crossroads, Heracles is seized with perplexity (*aporia*), a detail picked up by *Kakia* in her address to the hero (“I see that you are in a state of *aporia* as to which of the two paths to

²³ See my remarks in “CQ” 53, 2003, 37f., where I more specifically compare Macbeth’s role in the story to that of Paris in his particular life-choice. Note that in Shakespeare’s treatment there is a vestige of road imagery with the reference to “the primrose way to the everlasting bonfire” in the famous “Porter’s Scene” (II.iii.20). See the article just cited, 38 n. 33.

²⁴ There is an even closer equivalence, since the English word ‘weird’ derives from *Urd*, the name of the eldest and most formidable Norn, as Grimm points out (n. 21 above), 348 = 407.

turn to"). A perplexed Heracles is rather an unexpected picture²⁵, indeed something of a paradox. The hero is regularly portrayed as resolute and resourceful in the face of any danger; even the hundred-headed hydra cannot daunt him. Vergil expresses this norm very well in *Aeneid* 8.298-300:

*nec te ullae facies, non terruit ipse Typhoeus
arduus arma tenens; non te rationis egentem
Lernaeus turba caputum circumstetit anguis.*

A commentator on this passage²⁶ has appropriately glossed its second half as conveying that even the hydra's threat did not find Heracles *amechanos*. And yet Prodicus pictured the hero as seized by *aporia*, a virtual synonym of *amechania*. How are we to explain this?

To answer the question I must myself take a turning which initially may seem more like a blind alley. Vladimir Propp, the Russian expert in folk-tales, memorably excogitated, in his famous monograph *The Morphology of the Folk-Tale*²⁷, a narrative scheme to fit the sort of folk-tale quest of which we saw examples earlier. Notoriously, this scheme begins with an initial lack which requires 'liquidating' by the successful termination of the quest. To summarise and paraphrase Propp's remarks²⁸, "the hero is approached with a request... he is allowed to go... to leave home". Then follows the key encounter, so far as we are concerned: near the start of his quest the hero "is tested, interrogated, attacked etc., which prepares the way for his receiving either a magical agent or helper". Specifying further this crucial episode, Propp observed that "the donor tests the hero, greets and interrogates" him and that the hero "reacts" to this process. This already fits Heracles at the Crossroads very closely.

²⁵ A still more trivial detail may also be made to yield up a comparable secret: we are told that in Prodicus' account, when the hero was assailed by *aporia*, he sat down. It may seem preposterous to make much of so banal a detail, but again the sedentary position is uncharacteristically passive for the active Heracles, and may derive from the world of folk-tale: among instances cited by Jung (below, n. 29) to illustrate the intervention of a helper figure to rescue a despairing hero or heroine, we find a Russian example: "as the peasant *sat down* wearily on a tree stump, a little old man crept out", while in another tale "still the princess *sat* in the same place and wept" – and the little old man duly appears. One final case from a different source (Palermo: see Italo Calvino's collection of Italian Folk-Tales, No. 164) begins (Engl. transl., p. 591) "There was once a lad who led a dog's life. One day when he was feeling particularly miserable, having nothing to eat, he went down and *sat* by the sea, hoping to think of a way out of his plight". The helper figure at once appears. See too Thetis' appearance to the seated Achilles in *Il.* 1.349ff.

²⁶ P.T. Eden ("Mnemosyne" Suppl. 35, Leiden 1975), 102.

²⁷ On the value of Propp's work to the study of Greek mythology see, for instance, my remarks in "CQ" 38, 1988, 278 and "WS" 115, 2002, 5ff.

²⁸ Propp, 38ff. of the English translation of his book (for details see "CQ" 38, 1988, 278 n. 8).

Propp does not further observe (it would have been irrelevant to his ‘morphological’ purposes) that, when the questing hero experiences the aforementioned encounter, he is regularly pictured as in the depths of despair and at his lowest ebb – what the ancient Greeks would have characterised as a state of *aporia* or *amechania*. This essential consideration was noted by the Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung in a delightful essay entitled *The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairytales*²⁹. “The old man”, he says, – for he rather unnecessarily restricts the relevant helper figure to this advanced stage of life, the most frequent³⁰ but by no means the only exemplification – “always appears when the hero is in a hopeless and desperate situation from which only profound reflection or a lucky idea... can extricate him. But since, for internal and external reasons, the hero cannot accomplish this himself, the knowledge needed to compensate the deficiency comes in the form of a personified truth, i.e. in the shape of this sagacious and helpful old man”, – or, let us stress again, in other appropriate shapes besides. The helper figure, whatever form he or she assumes, represents, according to Jung, “this purposeful reflection and concentration of moral and physical forces that comes about spontaneously... when conscious thought is not yet – or is no longer – possible”³¹.

One cannot shy away from the fact that Jung’s account here is deeply self-serving: the context of his remarks makes clear, what is anyway evident from the internal evidence, that he identifies himself, in his role as psychoanalyst, with the little old man who appears to the hero at his darkest hour. But this should not blind us to the perceptiveness of Jung’s remarks when applied to the mechanics of the folk-tale. And—to return now to the relevance of all this to Heracles at the Crossroads—the unusual detail of a Heracles gripped by *aporia* seems to me to be the key point that links Prodicus’ allegory to the world of the folk-tale quest. There would already be abundant cause to make this connection, which one could achieve by saying, for instance, that the notion of human life as a quest or a journey or an adventure is wide spread and deeply rooted; the opening verse of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is but the most famous manifestation of this: *Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita* (“In the middle of the journey that is our life”)³². But the motif of *aporia* binds even more closely the world of folk-tale and Prodicus’ narrative.

²⁹ *Symbolik des Geistes* 400ff. = *Collected Works* X.1, 217ff. (For further details on first publication and reprintings see “Prometheus” 29, 2003, 63 n. 34).

³⁰ For the old age of many of folk-tale’s helper figures see my remarks in “BICS” 49, 2006, 108.

³¹ Jung as above, n. 29, 401ff. = 217ff.

³² For the path of life see n. 18 above.

The very closest analogy which the folk-tale's quest can supply for Prodicus' picture of a Heracles in *aporia* comes from the fifth century mythographer Pherecydes (*FGrHist* 3 F 16A) and happens to concern the self-same hero: when Heracles was in a state of perplexity (*aporia* again!) as to where he might gain the apples of the Hesperides³³, Nereus, Old Man of the Sea, appeared and gave him the answer (Ἡρακλεῖ ἀποροῦντι μαθεῖν παρὰ Νηρέως ποῦ ἔλη τὰ χρύσεα μῆλα), referring him on to some unspecified nymphs³⁴. The second closest analogue, likewise involving the Greek verb meaning "to suffer from *aporia*", occurs at Herodotus 4.179.2, where we learn that Jason (of the Argonauts' fame) was in perplexity (ἀποροῦντι) in the Libyan desert until Triton appeared to him. We may turn to a different author's rendering of the same dilemma for further enlightenment, since Apollonius of Rhodes' epic, the *Argonautica*, explaining how the first stage of the dilemma was handled, tells us that the nymphs of Libya took pity on the Argonauts as they wasted away in *amechania* (4.1308: σφέας ἐλέησαν ἀμηχανίη μινύθοντας; cf. ib. 1318 τίπτ' ἐπὶ τόσσον ἀμηχανίη βεβόλησαι: the same noun). Recall how we saw above that this latter word can be taken as a close synonym of *aporia*³⁵.

I now move on to an area which I have come to regard as one of the most important aspects of the story-pattern under consideration: the *ambivalence* of the so-called helper figures who test the hero³⁶. Even when it is a case of one helper figure being encountered by one hero, there is regularly an initial reluctance to help, as witness the attitude to Heracles and other heroes displayed by the Old Man of the Sea, with his resort to metamorphosis. When there are three siblings successively encountering one helper, the latter's friendliness to the youngest sibling is explicable and rationalisable as a reciprocal reaction to that sibling's friendly or helpful attitude, and his hostility to the remainder as a reaction to their unhelpful or unfriendly response.

We saw above how Schultz rather surprisingly thought that the Norns might be compared to the female figures in Prodicus' account of Heracles at

³³ Note that the Hesperides represent, as Schultz observed, another group of female divinities associated with a tree (see nn. 20-22 above) and Heracles.

³⁴ Since this further group of female helper figures are referred to specifically as nymphs, we may recall that Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum* 102, in his description of the Norns, uses the Latin words *Parcae* and *Nymphae* of them.

³⁵ For further comment on the role of ambivalent helpers in the story of Jason in Libya see my remarks in "SCO" 48, 2002, 57-67. On the folk-tale hero's *aporia* see further "ZPE" forthcoming. I shall also be dealing with the vexed question of Jason's *aporia* in Apollonius in a separate article.

³⁶ For such ambivalence in general see my remarks in "CQ" 38, 1988, 286f.

the Crossroads. Now Jacob Grimm³⁷, in analysing the general significance of these figures from Norse mythology, drew attention to a tendency in their behaviour whereby “the advantages promised in preceding benefactions [are] partly neutralised by a succeeding one”, and cited as particularly relevant the tale of Nornagest, who is visited as a new-born baby by the Norns. Urd, the oldest, prophesies that he shall be handsome and brave, Verdandi, the next, that he shall win prowess as a poet; but Skuld, the third, feeling that she has been insulted, declares that he shall live only as long as a taper burning on the wall. This cannot but remind us of the account of Meleager given by the Latin mythographer Hyginus (he lived in the second century A.D., but late mythographers can occasionally preserve primitive-looking variants)³⁸. In *Fabula* 171 he informs us that his hero was visited shortly after his birth by the Fates: Clotho announced that he would be *generosus*, Lachesis that he would be *fortis*; but Atropos proclaimed that he would live only so long as a brand burning itself out on the hearth. In each case the pattern produces an overall impression of ambivalence that has parallels in the actions of other groups of numinous females. It is appropriate, in view of the parallel just cited, that the Greek Moirae or Fates of Hesiod’s *Theogony* 904-906 should bestow on mankind both good and ill (ἀγαθὸν τε κακὸν τε). This reminds us that even such apparently positive figures as the Muses can have their darker side (Hesiod says of them, or makes them say of themselves, at *Theogony* 27f. that they know how to speak the truth and also things that only resemble the truth) and the same is true of the Hesperides³⁹.

Classical scholars have become interested in a number of folk-tales from modern Greece and elsewhere which supply parallels for the above cited motif of the hero with an ‘external soul’ dependent upon a log of wood *vel*

³⁷ P. 388 = p. 408f.

³⁸ J.T. Kakridis, “Philologus” 44, 1935, 8f. rightly sees this detail as early and primitive. For further instances, drawn from modern Greek, Bulgarian and Serbian folk-tales, of goddesses of destiny announcing the hero’s fate on the third day after his birth see G.A. Megaw’s article s.v. “Alkestis” in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* I 316 (A3a) and the bibliography on p. 319.

³⁹ On the ambivalence of the Muses see G. Luck, in *Horizonte der Humanitas* (Walter Willi Festschrift, Bern-Stuttgart 1960), 89 = *Ancient Pathways and Hidden Pursuits* (Ann Arbor 2000), 73 and my remarks in “CQ” 53, 2003, 42f. They are sometimes associated with the Sirens, on whose ambivalence see my remarks in “CQ” 54, 2004, 609f. As for the Hesperides, note Wilamowitz, *Glaube der Hellenen* I (Berlin 1931), 267f. who observes that they were not only the friendly nymphs of a paradisiacal garden, but, again according to Hesiod (*Th.* 215), the offspring (like Death) of Night, and the companions of the dreadful snake that guards their apples (*Th.* 335). Wilamowitz thinks they were originally conceived of as birds singing on the branches of their tree, and likens them to Sirens and Harpies.

*sim.*⁴⁰. Their attention has been mainly focussed on the tales' conclusion, which depicts the hero's death due to the anger of a hostile female relative, mother or wife, and we too shall return to that aspect below. But what is of most interest to the present inquiry is the opening, in which three female beings visit the infant hero on the third or seventh day after his birth. The more usual sequence is that the first two figures to speak utter benevolent prophecies for the hero's future, while the third is malign (and even where that sequence is varied, the final effect is still one of overall ambivalence). But secondly and more importantly, in one particular Modern Greek version from Aetolia⁴¹, there is an interesting detail as to the position taken by the Fates⁴² before they speak: one stands to the right of the baby's cradle, one to the left, and one above its head, i.e. to the middle. This positioning cannot fail to remind us of the layout of the three roads in some of the folk-tales with which this article began.

So in a Russian version⁴³, there is a road leading to the right (he who takes this will live, but his horse will die), a road leading to the left (he who takes this will die, but his horse will live), and a road in the middle (hunger and thirst are assigned to whoever, like the youngest brother, takes this path). Or again, in a Kirgisian account⁴⁴, we find a lower road (who takes this will not go home), a middle road (who takes this will go home)—the two elder brothers choose it—, and an upper road (who takes this will know God), for which the youngest brother opts. My argument here is not that there is any specific correlation between these details and the allocations of the Fates in the Aetolian account (where the Fate to the middle ordains instant death for the infant, the Fate to the right is for sparing, and the Fate to the left hits on the compromise of the brand on the fire). Rather, there is a

⁴⁰ J.T. Kakridis, *Homeric Researches* (Lund 1949), 127ff. More recent analysis and bibliography in R.W. Bredrich's article s.v. "Meleager" in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* (IX 547ff.). Cf. n. 33 above. On the issue of overall balance of foretold good and ill in the tales about to be considered, see my remarks in "Eikasmós" 21, 2010, 346 on tales (such as *Sleeping Beauty*) where the reverse sequence obtains, with initial ill being mitigated by a more beneficial ruling.

⁴¹ Kakridis as in n. 40, 130. On the wider issue of the symbolic significance of left and right, and its relevance to Heracles at the Crossroad see J. Hall, *The Sinister Side. How left-right Symbolism shaped Western Art* (Oxford 2008), 126 ff.

⁴² The 'continuity' between the conceptions of the Fates in ancient and modern Greece is brought out by J.C. Lawson, *Modern Greek Folklore and Ancient Greek Religion* (Cambridge 1910), 121ff., in the course of which discussion he cites (p. 123) a further modern example of these deities' cradle visits, this time involving a girl, to whom the two benignant Fates bequeath the qualities of beauty and chastity, the malign one laziness.

⁴³ Köhler (above n. 11), v = 538.

⁴⁴ Köhler, v = 539.

general similarity discernable in the overall principle of a balancing of good and bad options.

One way of interpreting the similarities just noticed between encounters at the cradle and at the crossroads would be to conclude that we have to do with a *doublet*: two versions of the same pattern, each adjusted to its particular setting. So at the hero's cradle, to which the relevant numinous female figures gather on the third or seventh day after his birth, there is no question of the baby⁴⁵ being able to make a considered choice⁴⁶ as to the nature of his future life: the females do it for him. At the crossroads, by contrast, the hero is on the verge of manhood, and mature enough to choose. The female figures in this case become the personifications of the options between which he is to make his choice.

At this point I am inspired to interpolate a further instance of the comparative method, one perhaps more provocative than anything that has gone before. I have just argued that the visit of three numinous personages to the cradle of a newly born hero prefigures, as it were, the pattern of a hero's life-choice made at a later stage of existence. And we have seen that the Choice of Heracles and the Judgement of Paris are prime examples of this pattern. Scholars have before now associated with these two stories of life-choice the New Testament's account of Christ's temptation by Satan in the Wilderness (a testing of hero by ambivalent helper if ever there was one)⁴⁷. Now this hero too was visited in his cradle by three impressive personages⁴⁸.

⁴⁵ Though one should stress that the two heroes most relevant to this article, Heracles and Paris, provide exceptions to this rule: the first by strangling, even in his cradle, the snakes sent by his jealous stepmother Hera, displays a precocious acceptance of his heroic destiny; the second, even before his birth, provokes a dream on his mother's part (involving a fire brand, be it noted) symbolising the baneful effect his career is to have on his family. Still, even here the detail of a prophecy is to be found: both in Pindar *Nem.* 1.62ff. and Theocritus 24.79ff. the sequel to Heracles' killing of the snakes is Tiresias' prophecy that he will be a great hero and then a god (after his mortal part is *burned away*, Theocritus reminds us, near Trachis); while the significance of the dream about Paris is expounded by Apollo (see Ennius' *Alexander* fr. XVIII Jocelyn with the editor's commentary ad loc. [p. 222]). "He will be a great hero and then a god" is the theme of the *Parcae*'s cradle prophecy in Vergil's Fourth *Eclogue*.

⁴⁶ The issue of a 'considered decision' and the relationship between 'internal' choice and 'external' representation of the terms of that choice in personified feminine and allegorical form has a number of complex aspects, some of them philosophical, into which I do not intend to go here. See, for instance, R. Merkelbach, *Achill, Herakles und Paris* (Goslar 1970), 1 ff. = *Hestia und Erigone* (Stuttgart 1996), 1ff.

⁴⁷ See my remarks in "CQ" 53, 2003, 34.

⁴⁸ Admittedly, the *magi* are nowhere in Matthew's narrative specifically said to be three in number, and that tradition would seem to be an inference from the number of their gifts (see

On quite independent grounds, the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh brought by the *magi* in Matthew's account (2.11) have been interpreted as symbolic of the infant's future career, with gold alluding to kingship, frankincense to deity, and myrrh to Christ's suffering and passion⁴⁹. Such an interpretation is now out of fashion with New Testament scholars, but we must distinguish between the interpretation of the gospel writer and a possible original significance⁵⁰. And surely it would be at no very great remove from the sequence whereby the three Norns or the three Fates prophesy differing destinies, the first two beneficent, the third deadly, for the new born child, if the three Magi had originally (and idiomatically) conveyed that their baby would be a king, would be a god, and would perish miserably like a common criminal. The male gender of these three figures is anomalous in this context, but no more so than the male gender of Satan, Christ's later tempter at the relevant crisis of life-choice.

To return, finally, to the sequel to the cradle scene, the hero's death when his 'external soul' is reduced to ashes. The female figure responsible for this outcome is regularly the hero's mother or wife, and in such cases, it has been said⁵¹, "the hero stands between two women, his mother and his wife". That the phrasing here should remind us of the picture of Heracles at the Crossroads is not, I think, a trivial and insignificant coincidence. The identity of the woman who consigns hero and soul to death is closely linked to the folk-tale issue of "whose love is strongest?", a question about the relative strengths of family ties whose implied 'ascending order of affection'

e.g. the commentaries ad loc. by F.W. Beare [Oxford 1981], 80 and D.J. Harrington [Minnesota 1991], 44), but the inference is reasonable, quite independently of the considerations here adduced.

⁴⁹ I quote but one example, from Paschasius Radbert (a famous theologian of the Carolingian period, who lived c. 740-860), in his commentary on Matthew 2.11 (ed. B. Paulus, CCCM 56 [1984], p. 165): *per aurum quippe quod maximum regum est ornamentum Regis insignia declarantes, per turem vero quia in sacrificiis antiquitus ponebatur eum venerantes Deum intellegere fatebantur. Per murra qua mortuorum corpora passim condiebantur eum testate sunt velut ex praesagio humanitus moriturum*. So when D.A. Hagner's commentary ad loc. (Dallas 1993), p. 30 observes that "the 'decoding' of the three gifts" referred to above is "irrelevant to Matthew's purpose", we may reply that this is almost certainly true, but that the very irrelevance suggests the details originally bore a different significance. For other folk-tale motifs in the New Testament's narratives of Christ's birth and infancy see my remarks in *Hesperos: Studies presented to M. L. West on his seventieth birthday* (Oxford 2007), 74ff.

⁵⁰ See T.C.W. Stinton, *Euripides and the Judgement of Paris* ("JHS" Suppl. 11, 1965) 7 = *Collected Papers on Greek Tragedy* (Oxford 1990), 21.

⁵¹ Kakridis (above, n. 40), 142.

has been detected in the story of Meleager⁵²; in the dilemma of Antigone⁵³; and in the successive encounters of Hector at *Iliad* 6 with mother, sister-in-law and wife⁵⁴. Since in this last case even the bonds of affection between husband and wife are not strong enough to keep Hector back from battle and ultimately death, this narrative too is interpretable as involving a crucial choice of life and duty, and this interpretation becomes all the more attractive if one supposes that Homer's treatment has further been influenced by the model of the Judgement of Paris, Hector's brother, Hector's three successive encounters with Hecuba, Helen, and Andromache deriving from Paris' simultaneous meeting with Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite.

To sum up, then, even more of the elements in Prodicus' Choice of Heracles seem likely to be traditional and rooted in folk-tale than has generally been supposed. Only the application of these pre-existing patterns to Heracles, conceived as an ancient Greek equivalent of the Christian Everyman figure, is likely to be attributable to Prodicus' inventive mind. A final point: the difference between two and three roads, two or three ambivalent females, is not, in fact, very significant. It has been pointed out⁵⁵ that the parallel difference between two or three brother stories is really relatively superficial: within the latter there is an underlying twofold structure, with the two elder siblings set off against the youngest, failure against success. And we can posit a like distinction between friendly and unfriendly female tempters or helpers, such as Virtue and Vice in the story of Heracles at the Crossroads.

I end with a perhaps unexpected example of the enduring nature of the story-patterns we have been examining. Ingmar Bergman's 1966 film *The Silence*, which I regard as the greatest of this great film-maker's

⁵² Kakridis, 152ff.

⁵³ See the article by U. Masing s.v. "Bruder eher als Gatten oder Sohn gerettet" in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* (II 861ff.). Note that, in this cycle of tales, the choice is most often between three options (husband, son, brother), with a paradoxical decision rejecting short term advantage for longer term benefit, as with Heracles at the Crossroads. (And in this cycle there is a class of stories (Masing, 863) involving choice between *two* options, which brings the situation even closer to Heracles').

⁵⁴ See my article *The Judgements of Paris and Solomon*, "CQ" 53, 2003, 32ff.

⁵⁵ Max Lüthi in his article s.v. "Bruder, Brüder" in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* (II 846): "Man spricht von Brüdermärchen, von Zweibrüdermärchen, Dreibrüdermärchen - mit den letztgenannten Ausdrücken ist Zweiteiligkeit beziehungsweise Dreiteiligkeit vorgegeben. Die Dreiteiligkeit präsentiert sich kleingliedrig: in den zahllosen Märchen, in denen drei Brüder nacheinander eine Aufgabe zu lösen trachten, nimmt die Darstellung des Versagens der beiden älteren wenig Platz in Anspruch, die Unternehmung den erfolgreicher Jüngsten aber wird gern mehrepisodig entfaltet. So ist schon innerhalb der Dreierform ein Zug zur Zweiteiligkeit spürbar".

achievements, involves the story of two antithetical sisters, one sensual and self-indulgent, the other, a translator, ascetic and intellectual, and clearly dying. Mysteriously stranded in a hotel in a town whose language they do not understand, they engage in a tug of war for the affections of the young son of the former sister. At the end, the other sister is left to die in the hotel, the mother and son returning home: the mother would seem to have won. But at the very last moment we, and she, realise that the child, in struggling to understand the few words of the town's language that the dead woman had scribbled on a sheet of paper, has made a different choice: the dead woman has claimed him. I have not the slightest idea whether Bergman was conscious that he was replicating the pattern of Heracles' choice, but this poignant and wonderful film is living proof of the continuing vitality of these story-patterns and their ability to move us still and perhaps lighten our tragic dilemmas even now⁵⁶.

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ABSTRACT. The folk-tale origins of the story of Heracles at the Crossroads are discussed and its association with the patterns of three questing brothers, of the tempting or testing of a hero, and of the female figures who attend on a hero shortly after his birth offering various destinies.

KEY WORDS: Life-choice, personifications, quest, road imagery, ambivalence.

⁵⁶ For two recent attempts by professional philosophers to analyse the ethical implications of the story see C. Sini, *Eracle al Bivio: semiotica e filosofia* (Turin 2007) and A.C. Grayling, *The Choice of Hercules: Pleasure, Duty and the Good Life in the 21st Century* (London 2007).